

OPINION



BY RAFIA ZAKARIA

White America

A CENTRAL tenet of President Donald Trump’s administration is to transform the US into a white Christian nation. Towards this end, fully armed Border Patrol and Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents are harassing everyone who is not white. Refusing to adhere to any constitutional constraints, they are dragging out black and brown children from high schools, employees from stores and travellers from airports and taking them to detention centres even if they are US citizens. In Minneapolis, where a white woman Renee Good was killed as a result of this frenzy, ICE agents were going into Somali-American neighbourhoods and pulling out entire families for detention.

It is no surprise then that this week, the State Department tweeted that it would “pause immigrant visa processing from 75 countries whose migrants take welfare from the American people at unacceptable rates. The freeze will remain active until the US can ensure that new immigrants will not extract wealth from the American people”. Following this, the list of countries was released, with the implicit allegation that those applying for immigration from these states were dependent on public benefits after arriving in the US, ie, they were using Medicaid, food stamps, housing assistance and other programmes designed for indigent Americans. No statistical evidence was provided to substantiate the claim that immigrants from these countries were more likely than others to use public benefits.

In fact, the administration doesn’t have to provide proof. The first Trump administration (2017-2021) weaponised the ‘public charge’ rule to scrutinise the likelihood of arriving immigrants using public benefits, making it hard for applicants to obtain Green Cards — in line with the Trumpian stance that immigrants were a general scourge. However, the following Biden administration restored the rule to what it had been before 2016.

Last November, the administration again proposed a new draft of the rule which states: “The 2022 regulations are not the best implementation of the statute, inconsistent with congressional intent, unduly restrictive, and hamper DHS’s [Department of Homeland Security] ability to make accurate, precise and reliable determinations of whether certain aliens are likely at any time to become a public charge”. Rescinding the rule would give immigration officers a freer hand to decide on immigrants’ use of public benefits in line with the government’s position that these

should not encourage immigration.

The State Department is tasked with enforcing this new understanding of the public charge rule and the 75 countries now face an indefinite pause in the processing of applications. Given that the Trump project is so inherently tied up with Christian nationalism and white supremacy, this shouldn’t be a surprise. In effect, it’s a moratorium on brown and black people immigrating because of family ties. Even spousal visas, which have historically been exceptions, are included in the pause.

Those applying for non-immigrant visas are exempt, which means that people applying for B tourist visas, F student visas, J exchange visitor visas and H and L employment-based visas will have their applications processed and visas issued. However, these categories are subject to other hindrances (such as the high fee for H-1B visas). A number of countries are also subject to a travel ban, which means their citizens cannot obtain a US visa under any circumstances.

The agony over visas does not matter to Trump’s administration.

a US citizen and are waiting for their visas to be processed, or parents who are awaiting Green Cards, face uncertainty. With many cases filed, people are left in limbo.

None of this international agony matters to the Trump administration. If anything, the stricter the rules it imposes on non-white immigrants, the happier it imagines its white supremacist MAGA base will be. Trump’s inability to revive the economy or create jobs, both of which were core promises of his poll campaign, mean that he has to take harsh actions involving immigrants in the hope that it will satisfy his increasingly annoyed voter base. And, midterm elections are coming up this year, with early indications that a strong anti-Trump sentiment will cause the Republican to lose the House and Senate and end the carte blanche that Trump now enjoys. Until then, any brown or black person wanting to come to America is likely to face extreme challenges. ■

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BY LARAIB NIAZ

Childhood dismantled

“WE feel like the living dead...” This is how children in Gaza describe their lives, according to a new study, *Palestinian Education Still Under Attack*, on the effects of attacks on education in Gaza and the West Bank. When asked about their hopes for the future, children no longer speak of school, work or aspirations. Their only wish, the report finds, is to live another day.

For people in Pakistan, whose collective memory is marked by colonial violence and its aftermath, this language is chillingly familiar. Imperialism has never worked through conquest and control alone. It has always attacked identity and dignity, most brutally in the lives of children and the most vulnerable.

What is happening in Gaza today is not simply the destruction of schools or the interruption of education. It is the systematic dismantling of childhood as a protective mechanism. Hunger now governs daily life in Gaza. The report depicts how parents are actively stopping their children from playing since play makes them hungry; hunger that families can no longer afford. Children are fainting in the few available learning spaces. Some children expressed how they do not want to attend school (or whatever alternative is available) since they lack shoes, clean clothes or even a single sheet of paper. This is how dignity is stripped away. Imperialism does not need to declare that certain lives matter less (though in this instance it has), it simply creates conditions where that conclusion becomes unavoidable.

Colonial subcontinent offers painful parallels. Under British rule, repeated famines were treated as unfortunate but acceptable outcomes of governance. Children stopped going to school not because education was formally banned, but because hunger, labour and violence made learning irrelevant. Children learned early that their bodies existed to endure, not to flourish.

In Gaza, bedwetting, mutism, panic attacks and withdrawal are widespread amongst children. Some children have stopped speaking altogether. Others speak only of death. Trauma is so unprecedented and pervasive; it has become life. Colonial power has always understood this. A population that cannot imagine a future is easier to manage than one that can.

The assault on dignity extends also to the body. Children have been acquiring life-altering injuries at an alarming rate; while rehabilitation services have collapsed and assistive devices are unavailable. Girls are experiencing lack of water, privacy and menstrual supplies, which silently pushes them out of education. Early marriage pressures have increased as families seek protection or economic relief. Boys have been

pushed into labour, exposed to violence while searching for food, all the while absorbing anger that has nowhere to go. Rising aggression among boys is framed as a behavioural problem, rather than as a predictable response to humiliation, hunger and abandonment. This is the systematic erosion of identity.

Pakistan’s history shows us what happens next when childhood is shaped by mass violence and deprivation. Partition did not end when borders were drawn. It lived on in families who taught their children to stay quiet, to expect loss, and to treat instability as normal. Millions of children grew up in households where the trauma of displacement, hunger and death was never addressed, yet omnipresent.

Families celebrated endurance while unresolved grief hardened into silence. Violence was absorbed into everyday life rather than named and addressed. Over time, this produced generations who learned to lower expectations, distrust institutions and accept inequality as fate

Children are fainting in the few available learning spaces.

rather than injustice. The costs of colonisation were not confined to one historical moment; they reproduced themselves through trauma, poverty and unequal access to education. This is how damage and trauma is normalised. When accountability and recognition is deferred, suffering is inherited. Children learn what the world expects of them long before they learn what they might want from it. This is why the dismantling of childhood matters. What is unfolding is not a temporary humanitarian emergency that can be solved by reopening schools alone. It is the systematic loss of childhood and, with it, the erosion of collective dignity and identity. When children say they feel like the living dead, they are not exaggerating. They are naming the collective trauma imposed on them.

For societies shaped by colonialism, this should not feel distant. We know what it means when generations grow up believing that tomorrow is not something to dream about, but something to endure. The real question is whether we recognise the machinery of imperialism while it is still operating, or only once its damage has already become history. ■

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FROM THE PAST PAGES OF DAWN

1976 Fifty years ago

Pay Commissions set up

RAWALPINDI: The Federal Government has set up a National Pay Commission to examine the question of pay scales, allowance and other amenities in respect of the employees of the Federal and Provincial Governments and of those senior executives of Corporations and autonomous bodies and organisations whose conditions of service are determined by the Federal and Provincial Governments. The nine-member Commission ... headed by Justice S. Anwarul Haq ... will make suitable recommendations ... for necessary adjustments.... Announcing this ... this evening [Jan 16], the Minister for Finance ... explained that in formulating their recommendations the Commission will ... take into account ... economic conditions... He ... disclosed that a separate Pay Commission, also headed by Justice Anwarul Haq, will look into the emoluments of the Armed Forces.... — Islamabad Bureau [Meanwhile, according to news agencies from Rawalpindi,] A ... meeting on land reforms presided over by Prime Minister Z.A. Bhutto here today [Jan 16] made a ... review of the implementation of the reforms and decided to take measures for expeditious finalisation of the remaining work.

1951 Seventy-five years ago

Kashmir solution vetoed

LONDON: The peace in Asia nay in the whole world depends on the solution of the Kashmir problem, said Pakistan’s Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan at a Press conference here today [Jan 16]. ...Liaquat reviewed the Commonwealth Prime Ministers talks on Kashmir, which had failed due to the adamant attitude of Bharati Premier Pandit Nehru, who turned down all the three proposals made at the talks for the solution of the problem through a fair plebiscite. [He] ... hinted ... that if the Commonwealth failed to solve the dispute satisfactorily Pakistan would be ready to sever its connections with it. — News agencies [Meanwhile, as reported by news agencies in London,] Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Bharati Premier, told a Press conference here today [Jan 16] that “some matters were clarified during the talks held on the Kashmir problem by Commonwealth Prime Ministers in London.” “It was not possible to come to any final agreement but ... we have gone a great deal towards an Agreement already. ... We are all agreed it is for the people of Kashmir to decide their future. Any agreement must come from the people of Kashmir or their representatives and not be imposed on them.” — News agencies

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Letters may be edited for purposes of clarity and space. All letters should carry the writer’s address, CNIC and phone numbers.



Time to make PIA a budget airline

THERE has been much controversy and debate over the privatisation of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA), with everyone having a view about how profitable, or unprofitable, the deal happens to be for the government. But there is hardly any discussion on what actually does the deal mean, or should mean, for the people of Pakistan.

Every single day, thousands of Pakistanis forgo air travel simply because it is too expensive. While neighbouring countries embrace budget carriers that make flying affordable, Pakistan remains stuck in an outdated aviation model. With PIA finally having been privatised, the country stands at a crossroads: continue patching the old model, or seize the opportunity to build a modern low-cost airline that serves ordinary Pakistanis.

Pakistan needs a fresh approach to air travel; one that reflects global trends and modern passenger needs. The federal government and the new stakeholders must re-establish PIA as a low-cost airline. Low-cost carriers, also known as budget or no-frills airlines, have transformed aviation worldwide by making air travel accessible. This concept is neither new nor experimental.

Let us take a look at the evidence. The world’s largest low-cost airline, Southwest Airlines, accounts for 11 per cent of global available seat kilometres, which is a measure of passenger capacity. Europe’s Ryanair represents another 10pc. Together, they demonstrate that delivering simple business models can deliver both profitability and accessibility. If designed properly, PIA could follow these principles while serving domestic and regional routes. But management structure will determine success or failure.

For the first decade, the management contract should be entrusted to a reputable low-cost operator rather than any Pakistani entity. This would help insulate the airline

from undue political pressures and ensure merit-based decision-making. An external management team with a significant, proven track record would bring the discipline, efficiency and transparency that Pakistan’s aviation sector lacks.

Low-cost airlines succeed by reducing operational expenses through fleet standardisation. Southwest and Ryanair operate only Boeing 737 aircraft, creating unified fleets. This allows any pilot to fly any aircraft in the system, enhances crew flexibility, and reduces training costs.

Maintenance becomes cheaper because engineers specialise in a single model. Spare-parts inventory remains limited and predictable. PIA should adopt this strategy, selecting one aircraft type to minimise costs and streamline operations.

Operating through secondary airports offers another advantage. Many Pakistanis abroad live near secondary airports. These airports charge lower landing fee, allow faster turnaround times and enable airlines to offer competitive fares while maintaining reliable schedules.

Besides, the airline should rely entirely on its website for ticket sales, eliminating third-party commissions. True to the low-cost model, PIA should operate with a single-cabin configuration, maximising seating capacity. Food and beverages should be sold as add-ons rather than included in ticket prices. Baggage rules must be strict and transparent, with only small carry-on luggage included in base fares. A low-cost airline like PIA could make air travel more affordable, boost tourism, increase domestic travel, and create thousands of jobs in aviation and related sectors. Introducing such a carrier would expand travel options, encourage competition, and help restore public confidence in Pakistan’s aviation industry.

Nabeel Badr
Islamabad

Open courts in Punjab

TO resolve public grievances, district authorities hold open courts across Punjab under government directives. The initiative is commendable, but it needs to be made more result-oriented. In the open court system, plaintiffs or complainants present their cases before the relevant authority, which then issues directions to the officers or departments concerned to resolve their issues. As such, these cases are expected to proceed towards legal resolution, but in many instances, results remain pending for various reasons.

Consequently, the complainants are compelled either to submit fresh applications, or to wait for the next open court session. This recurring delay undermines the very purpose of justice.

To enhance the effectiveness of the open court system, there is an urgent need to establish an online monitoring system to track the progress of cases discussed

in these sessions. Such a mechanism would ensure accountability, timely resolution, and transparency.

Furthermore, introducing an effective feedback system is essential to the task of making society more just, and to truly strengthen the integrity of the framework. All officials who perform their duties exceptionally well should be recognised with medals to encourage others as well.

Muhammad Iqbal Awan
Mianwali

Oppressed employees

THE federal government had recruited employees from across the country to settle in the newly established capital city, Islamabad. These employees were allotted official residences and they lived there for 30 to 40 years during their service. When these employees neared retirement, their children — born and raised in the clean and well-organised environment of Islamabad — refused to return to their ancestral and underdeveloped hometowns.

Sensing this situation, the government established an institution modelled after the Defence Housing Authority (DHA), known today as the Federal Government Employees Housing Authority (FGEHA). Its primary purpose was to ensure the timely provision of personal housing to retiring employees.

Unfortunately, this institution soon forgot its objectives and became a hub of incompetent officers, corruption, land mafias and contractors.

The first wrong step it took was to limit its role to allotting plots of land instead of building houses. The second was that senior officers, who are fewer in number, were allotted more plots, while the lower-grade employees, who are far greater in number, were given fewer plots. As a result, the officers received large plots after just a few years of service, while the lower-grade employees, despite depositing their savings, were left waiting helplessly.

In the present situation, the allottees of Green Enclave-I (2009), poor government servants who invested their life savings back then, are now retired, battling illness and poverty, and living in small rented houses. Even after 16 years, they are still waiting to get possession of their plots of land. Many of them have already passed away, and their widows are left to wander from office to office seeking justice.

In this dire situation, the executive committee of FGEHA is still considering imposing additional fines on these poor, retired employees. Where will these pensioners and widows find the money to pay such penalties? Should they sell their 40 years of service for a mere Rs1.5 million through property dealers? Is this justice? Is this how states are supposed to function?

Z.A. Zulfi
Islamabad

Fairness of e-challans

THE introduction of the e-challan system in Karachi represents a long-overdue attempt to break with business as usual in traffic governance. After decades of weak enforcement and habitual noncompliance, a measure of strictness is unavoidable.

However, enforcement cannot succeed on deterrence alone. The durability of any regulatory framework rests on its perceived fairness and consistency. When enforcement appears selective, even well-intentioned, reforms begin to lose their footing.

Currently, the burden of enforcement falls largely on private cars and motorcycles, while commercial and government vehicles often slip through the system. Smoke-belching buses, garbage trucks and dumpers over-speeding at night, and heavy vehicles occupying express lanes with little consequence send a damaging signal.



When such violations are allowed to pass under the radar, public trust erodes and compliance becomes an uphill battle.

Public transport exposes even deeper cracks in the system. Minibus drivers operating without seatbelts, speeding buses, and the recent detection of an underage bus driver, point to systemic failures in licensing, verification and training. These incidents are not isolated bad apples; they are symptoms of a regulatory framework that has long been asleep at the wheel.

Motorcycles add another layer of concern as many of them happen to be without rear-view mirrors and functional tail lights. Ignoring these basic safety requirements while penalising other infractions puts the cart before the horse.

Ultimately, the debate is not about whether or not strictness is needed. In societies marked by prolonged regulatory decay, it clearly is needed. The real test lies in whether that strictness is applied across the board and in the right order.

Inder Kishan
Hyderabad

► **PRESSURE HORNS:** The use of pressure horns by bus drivers is very common in Balochistan. No other vehicle has such types of horns. Bus drivers honk unnecessarily to either force their way ahead, or for seeking the attention of potential passengers. Passengers travelling for the first time in such buses are often taken by surprise. Those with heart problems are particularly affected by it. Pressure horns can cause accidents as drivers may lose balance or stop suddenly. The relevant authorities must ensure that bus drivers do not use such horns, and they avoid honking unnecessarily.
Aijaz D.K.
Hub

► **COINS ARE LEGAL TENDER:** Coins of Rs1, Rs2, Rs5 and Rs10 have practically lost their value in Balochistan, and are no longer accepted in shops and markets despite being legal tender. As a result, people suffer repeated losses during routine transactions. In many cases, shopkeepers deliberately set prices in a way that earns them extra money. This practice unfairly shifts the burden on to ordinary citizens, especially low-income families, who make small purchases daily. Coins are designed precisely for minor transactions, such as buying tea or snacks. The State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) must ensure that coins are accepted and circulated properly across Balochistan.
Abid Rahmat
Turbat

► **NOISE POLLUTION:** Marriage halls located near our residential community have been causing severe disturbances. Loud songs, music from speakers, and fireworks have made it increasingly difficult for the area residents to sleep or maintain a peaceful home environment. Despite informal complaints, the situation persists, affecting the health, safety and wellbeing of the residents. This raises serious concerns regarding noise pollution regulations and enforcement in residential areas of Karachi. The authorities concerned should take urgent and effective action against these violations, and ensure that residential neighbourhoods are protected from such disturbances.
Attaulah Khan
Karachi

External Ombudsman

Veteran journalist Muhammad Ali Siddiqi is Dawn’s External Ombudsman (DEO). His duty is to attend to our readers’ complaints, and to respond to them professionally. DEO is the investigating authority to whom all complaints can be referred, and it is DEO who takes notice of any alleged violations of Dawn’s code of ethics, and informs the Editor for appropriate action.
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